

Comments to the FCC Localism Task Force Hearing  
Monterey, California  
July 20, 2004  
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I am John Higgins, an Associate Professor of Mass Communication at Menlo College in Atherton, California, and President of the Board of Directors of the San Francisco Community Television Corporation. The CTC is the non-profit organization operating the public access channel and facilities for the city and county of San Francisco. All members of the board are volunteers, united with the mission to strengthen the fabric of our community's life through the tools of media.

A personal story: life seemed a lot more clear 30 years ago: I was working at a commercial radio station and volunteering at a grassroots, community-based radio station. It seemed pretty clear to me at the time: the commercial station was evil but fun and provided a paycheck, while the community station represented unfiltered voices from the community, and was therefore all goodness and light.

The General Manager of the commercial station was the person who helped me see that radio needed all kinds of stations; that radio wasn't supposed to be "either/or" . . . but "and/also."

"We need both types of stations," he said. He was one of those people born with radio in their veins. He believed in localism the public good . . . and the Fairness Doctrine. He said the Fairness Doctrine requirements helped to even the playing field for broadcasters who really wanted to serve their communities with local news and information. "There are some unscrupulous broadcasters," he said, "who will only do programs addressing public issues if you make them."

Years later, he was sorry to see the Fairness Doctrine go -- as well as other requirements that made broadcasters accountable to their communities.

The last time I saw him -- a few years ago -- he said he was thinking about getting out of radio. Since 1996, the loss of small, locally owned radio meant that corporations had stolen the soul of radio . . . and now radio had no localism, no addressing of local needs and issues. In fact, you couldn't even get the time: it was always reported as the minutes after the hour, but what was the hour?

So that's part one: Restore these basic regulations of localism, community needs, and public interest, which actually means the "public good" -- not necessarily what much of the public seems to be interested in, but the information and debate that we need to hear as engaged citizens in a democratic society.

Part two is the "and/also" part . . . "and/more." We do need both: the broadcast station, with its professional gatekeepers and requirements to serve the public good, as well as community-based, grassroots local media that serve as an unfettered voice for ideas and opinions from the local population.

We know that the model for local involvement and control through franchising works. We know that the set-asides for public, educational, and governmental access channels on cable television effectively encourage localism and civic participation. And we know that proper funding for these facilities through charges involved in the use of the public right-of-way is crucial to sustainable community media.

So, as part of the concept of "and/more," let's take all media outlets and apply the 10% rule: Ten percent set-asides for public use ? locally owned and locally controlled. Let's apply the 10% rule to broadcast digital channels, broadband, and satellite. Let's also apply the 10% rule to the programming time on existing broadcast channels. And let's add media training and sustainable funding as a requirement to these locally-oriented set-asides.

So that's part one and two: reinstate the basic regulations of localism that require broadcasters to cover issues of importance to their communities in a balanced manner. And set aside 10% of all media outlets for public use, using the model of local franchising.

Over thirty years ago the FCC helped give birth to a model of publicly owned and controlled grassroots media: access cable ? public, educational, and governmental. Congratulations! The model is an outstanding success. Now let's apply this model of localism to all other media and data technologies.

Thank you.